

# **Stress and Heart Disease: How Caregiving Increases Your Risk**

Do you feel physically unwell when you are nervous or fearful? Are you “worried sick”? It’s not just your imagination. Stress can increase the risks of various conditions, including heart disease.

## **How Stress Affects Your Heart**

When you are under stress, your body releases hormones called adrenaline and cortisol. They give you the mental focus and physical energy to respond to danger. This is called the “fight or flight” response. If the cause of your stress doesn’t last long, these hormones dissipate quickly. Your heart might pound for a while, but when you realize you’re safe, you calm down and your body goes back to normal.

But stress can sometimes become chronic. Over time, it can weaken your body’s cells, making them more prone to damage and disease. For example, strokes, high blood pressure, and heart attacks are closely linked to chronic stress. Also, some people cope with stress by smoking, overeating, or drinking too much alcohol. These behaviors can also increase the risk of heart disease.

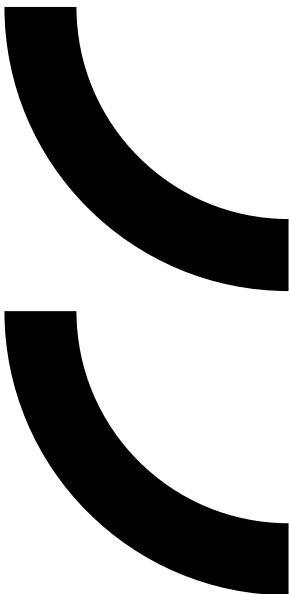
# Caregiving and Stress

Compared with other people, family caregivers are at higher risk for stress-related health problems such as depression, stroke, and heart disease. They often report back pain from the effort of moving a loved one. And they tend to spend so much time taking their loved one to doctors appointments that they miss their own. In addition, many caregivers miss work, don't take vacations, and don't have time to spend with friends. All these things can add to chronic stress.

As a caregiver, you often can't remove the primary source of stress in your life. So how can you protect your heart?

Caregiving comes with many responsibilities. VNS Health offers support services to give you expert help and guidance.

Learn About Caregiver Support Services



# How to Protect Your Health

## Change Your Outlook

The best way to protect yourself is to recognize the warning signs of stress and figure out how to prevent it from getting too high. Experts say that a positive attitude can decrease your risk of health problems by as much as 20%! But going from worry and negative thoughts to a more positive outlook can be hard.

Mental health therapists suggest a technique called cognitive reframing. Putting a picture in a different frame can change the way it looks. Reframing can change how you think about events and yourself. Instead of focusing on what you didn't or can't do, focus on what you did do. Were you able to get all your questions answered at a doctors appointment? Did you make your loved one smile? Were you able to relieve their pain?

## Practice Mindfulness

Don't scold yourself when you realize you're thinking about negative things or what you didn't do. Instead, simply acknowledge those thoughts and move on. This is a part of [mindfulness](#).

# Get Help

As your loved one's health changes, you may experience extreme stress. If they are receiving home care, speak to their nurse about managing stress. You may find that talking to a social worker is helpful. You may want to look into [caregiver support services](#) from VNS Health. And [respite care](#) services provided by a [home health aide](#) can give you a break.

Speak to your doctor about the possibility that you might be depressed. When you're mentally healthy, you're more likely to see the world in a positive way and more likely to take care of yourself.